Subject Inspection of Irish
REPORT

Presentation Secondary School, Loughboy
County Kilkenny
Roll number: 61590S

Date of inspection: 10 November 2009
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN IRISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Presentation Secondary School, Loughboy. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in Irish and makes recommendations for the further development of the teaching of this subject in the school. The evaluation was conducted over two days during which the inspector visited classrooms and observed teaching and learning. The inspector interacted with students and teachers, examined students’ work, and had discussions with the teachers. The inspector reviewed school planning documentation and teachers’ written preparation. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal and the subject co-ordinator. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report; a response was not received from the board.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

First-year classes are mixed ability in Presentation Secondary School, Loughboy. The students are then divided in second year based on the results of summer examinations at the end of first year and on the wishes of the students themselves and of their parents. Usually, there are two ordinary level and two higher-level classes in second and third year. This is so in the current second year. In the current third year, there are three higher-level classes and one ordinary-level class which demonstrates the Irish teachers’ laudable efforts to encourage students to stay at higher level according to their ability. Transition Year (TY) is optional in the school and there are generally three Irish classes, two higher-level and one ordinary-level class group in this year. In fifth and sixth year there are two higher-level and two ordinary-level classes. Sometimes, depending on the cohort of students in senior cycle, there are three higher-level class groups in fifth and sixth year. The efforts of teachers in relation to encouraging students to take higher-level examinations in Irish in the State examinations are recognised and commended.

Good provision is made for Irish in all junior-level classes with five periods a week. There are three periods of Irish per week in Transition Year. It is recommended that school management review this provision to see if would be possible to provide a fourth period in order to ensure an interesting and comprehensive programme in Irish for that year. There are five periods allocated in fifth year and six periods in sixth year which is an excellent provision.

There are eight teachers teaching Irish in the school. Four of these have degrees in Irish and the other teachers have years of experience in teaching the language. The classes and the levels are exchanged between teachers in order to extend opportunities to teach all ages and levels of ability.

Forty-two students are exempt from studying Irish out of the six hundred and one students in the school. Eight of these exemptions have been granted to students who were educated abroad up until age eleven. Fourteen of the exemptions have been granted to students with a range of learning difficulties and another twenty exemptions to students from abroad.
School management and the Irish teachers fully support the promotion of the language in the school. Groups of students are brought on weekend trips to the Gaeltacht. This practice is highly commended. Seachtain na Gaeilge is celebrated in the school with a table quiz, with art, poetry and prose competitions and with céilí dances. In addition, the students are brought to productions of Irish plays when these are available locally. There used to be a strong Irish debating tradition in the school and it is regrettable that this tradition has lapsed in recent years. It is recommended that the possibilities of reviving the valuable tradition of Irish debating be explored. The teachers are to be commended for their efforts in providing a co-curricular and extra-curricular programme in Irish. This greatly enhances the teachers’ efforts in the classrooms. It is recommended however, that the co-curricular and extra-curricular programme be examined with a view to expansion and development so that a programme of events could span the full year.

It was reported that the Irish teachers have a central storage area for language teaching and learning resources. The Irish teachers meet together once a year to decide what resources to request from senior management. There are reportedly many Irish resources available in the school but no list of them was available on the day of the inspection. It is recommended that the teaching materials and resources available in the school which support the teaching of Irish should be listed in the school’s plan for Irish.

The vast majority of Irish teachers in the school do not have their own base classroom which means that it is difficult to create an Irish atmosphere in the classrooms to enhance language learning. A certain amount of material was displayed in some class rooms as an aid to the teaching and learning of Irish and it was observed that a few classrooms were very effectively decorated with language materials and students’ work. Much use can be made of charts, posters and other materials during the classes to support students’ learning, especially those who have difficulties with learning the language. It is recommended that Irish teachers and school management ensure that school signage is bilingual when possible and that other materials are displayed in Irish to support the profile of the language in the school.

It was reported that there is not an established tradition in the school of students attending Irish summer courses. It is recommended that the teachers and school management inform students and their parents of the advantages of spending time in the Gaeltacht or on an Irish summer course and that they provide information for them about the courses, those available locally and in Gaeltacht regions.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The Irish teachers meet once a term as a group. Booklists, allocation of students to classes, Seachtain na Gaeilge and common exams are the most frequent topics for discussion. Short minutes of the meetings are kept in Irish. It was reported that the Irish teachers also have many informal meetings during the year. The Irish department has a subject co-ordinator and the most senior Irish teacher fills that role at present.

A plan for the teaching and learning of Irish was made available during the inspection. The teachers are to be commended for their work to date in compiling that plan. The syllabus aims are outlined in the plan, as well as Departmental circulars which are included for reference. The year plans contain lists of materials and topics, although some year plans are more detailed. Those plans include a short description of aims, objectives, sources and means of assessment and the work carried out on those plans is to be commended. It is recommended that the overall plan for the teaching and learning of Irish be further developed to include details of methodologies, learning objectives, methods of assessment, a list of the resources available to the department of
Irish and the use of suitable materials and resources to teach various topics. From observation of lessons in the course of the inspection, it is clear that the use of information and communications technology (ICT) in the teaching of Irish should be strengthened. The Second Level Support Service for Irish currently provides courses in this area in all of the education centres around the country. Planning for the use of ICT should be central to the plan for teaching and learning the language.

A plan for the teaching and learning of Irish was provided for TY but the plan is quite general and it is not immediately apparent what type of programme is followed by students during that year. It is recommended that the Irish teachers review the plan for the teaching of Irish in TY in order to develop and expand it. TY provides the teachers with an invaluable opportunity to teach subjects in innovative and creative ways. It is recommended that the Irish teachers take this opportunity to compile an interesting programme which will allow students to experience Irish as a living language. An extra programme called “Culture Studies” is taught in TY in the school. This course relates to Irish culture and every student, even those who are exempt from studying Irish, attends it. This is a very interesting and diverse course which is based on the history of Irish music and dance. According to the programme set out for the year, and which is taught over two periods a week, the course gives the students a very comprehensive insight into important aspects of Ireland’s culture. The work carried out in the planning and teaching of this course is commendable.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Very good use was made of Irish as the language of classroom management, communication and instruction in the classes observed. In one case however unnecessary use was made of translation from Irish to English. The teachers, in the main, are to be commended for their dedication to using the target language and to avoiding translation from Irish to English.

The students made every effort to answer the teachers’ questions in Irish and also to pose questions in the target language. It was clear that they were used to this approach as the practice and policy of the Irish teachers. Very worthwhile efforts were made in many classes to afford the students opportunities for communication in the target language through the use of pair work and these efforts are to be commended. It is recommended, however, that teachers ensure that regular opportunities for pair work, role-playing and group work in the target language are created in all Irish classes.

The use of repetition during lessons ensured that students were able to correctly pronounce new words and phrases and this approach is commendable. Students are more confident in using the target language when they have the correct pronunciation. Grammar mistakes were corrected in many instances in the course of lessons. Open-ended questioning was used to great effect in order to ensure the students’ knowledge about lesson content and as a strategy to encourage students to speak. This strategy worked very well in some lessons where the students had a good standard of Irish and it was clear that they were accustomed to expressing their opinions in Irish class.

Efforts were made to ensure that a range of activities were carried out in most Irish lessons. The students had the opportunity to practice the four language skills, listening, reading, speaking and writing. This is good practice. The teachers are encouraged to discuss the use of a wider range of methodologies and should try some of the approaches recommended at the in-service courses given by the Second Level Support Service for Irish.
Grammar was taught in an integrated manner in most lessons observed. Grammatical points were integrated into all lessons and except for one or two ordinary-level lessons, a good grammatical knowledge among the students was observed. One case was observed however, where grammar was being taught without a context and the students’ attention was drawn to the verbs and grammatical rules without any practical application. It is vital to ensure that the students can apply the verbs and grammatical rules they learn as part of their learning of the language. It is important therefore that students are asked to put the new words and verbs in simple sentences as soon as they acquire them, in order to show that they understand their meaning as well as their correct linguistic usage.

There was a good atmosphere in most classes observed. The teachers were energetic and diligent and it was clear that the majority of students were really enjoying and benefiting from the learning. Good use was made of humour in some cases observed and this really added to the effectiveness of the teaching and to the enjoyment of the lesson for the students. The teachers circulated around the classrooms checking that work was completed and that the students understood what they had to do. Discipline was excellent and it was clear that there was mutual respect between students and teachers. The students continually received praise for their efforts during lessons.

Apart from the whiteboard, which was used effectively in the many of the lessons, and textbooks, few other resources were used in the Irish lessons. It is essential that the teachers regularly use a broad range of materials and resources during Irish lessons. Pictures, photographs, music, television programmes, websites and films should be integrated so as to encourage and stimulate student interest in the content of the lessons. Prose and literature should be put in context for the students and the use of contemporary aids and material greatly helps to achieve this goal. The Irish language media are a great resource and it is recommended that regular use be made of them. Other sources can also be relied upon to access material suited to the Irish classroom. Worthwhile efforts were made in a few of the lessons observed to relate the subject of the lesson to contemporary life and to the interests of students. It is recommended that this practice should be extended to all lessons so as to make the learning of Irish more interesting for students.

**ASSESSMENT**

House examinations are organised at Christmas and in the summer. Reports are sent home to parents after the house examinations. Common examinations are set for first year classes and the teachers are to be commended for this work.

It was reported that a formal assessment of students’ communicative skills takes place in fifth and sixth year as preparation for the oral examination. The students in sixth year are brought on a week-end trip to the Gaeltacht just before the orals to afford them the opportunity of improving their spoken Irish. This approach is highly commendable. It is recommended, however, that the students’ communication skills in all the other year groups, from first year onwards, should be formally assessed. It is essential that students understand the importance of this aspect of language learning. A presentation of an fáinne, could also be organised for TY students as part of the assessment programme for that year.

It was evident from the copybooks examined that homework is assigned and corrected regularly. Very careful corrections had been made in most copybooks examined but there was a variety of practices in the approach to correcting. In order to ensure the effectiveness of the corrections, it is recommended that the teachers agree on a common system of correcting which would refer to the students’ progress and which would award a mark or grade for the work completed. In addition,
it would greatly assist the students in learning from their mistakes if there were a common system in place for correcting of errors. Good practice was observed in some lessons where the teachers spoke about common mistakes which were identified in the written work and these mistakes were then discussed in the class.

A high number of students in Presentation College take higher-level Irish in the State examinations, both in the Junior Certificate and the Leaving Certificate. The teachers and school management are to be congratulated for their dedication to sustaining the high number of students taking higher-level Irish examinations. Very good attainment is achieved in Irish at both levels in the certificate examinations.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main findings identified in the inspection:

- A high number of students take higher-level Irish in the certificate examinations. The attainment in Irish at both levels in certificate examinations is very good.
- The school’s senior management is very supportive of Irish. The teachers make good efforts to provide a co-curricular and extra-curricular programme in Irish and their work in this regard is very commendable.
- Very good use was made of Irish as the language of classroom management, communication and instruction in most of the lessons observed.
- During most lessons, students were given opportunities to speak and communicate in Irish.
- There was a good range of activities as part of the Irish lessons and they were well paced as a result.
- There was an atmosphere of enjoyment and encouragement in all lessons observed and it was clear that students were at ease and were enjoying their learning.

As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:

- It is recommended that the possibilities relating to broadening and developing the co-curricular and extra-curricular programme for Irish be explored. It would also be worthwhile renewing the Irish debating tradition in the school.
- It is recommended that school management remind parents of the importance of doing summer Irish courses and to give them information about Gaeltacht courses and courses closer to home.
- It is recommended that the plan for Irish be broadened and developed in order to underline the centrality of the use of methodologies and the use of ICT in the classrooms. The plan for the teaching of Irish in Transition Year should also be augmented.
- It is recommended that many more materials and resources should be used in Irish lessons.
- It is recommended that the students’ communicative skills in Irish should be assessed from first year onwards.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the principal and with the subject co-ordinator at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.
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